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## **Northern Ireland: New report slams failure to deal with the past**

*“There’s a cruel irony in the fact that Northern Ireland is held up as a success story when many victims’ families actually consider their treatment a failure.”*

Victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland are being ‘disgracefully let down’ by a flawed and fragmented approach to dealing with the past, Amnesty International said today (Thursday 12 September) as it published a new report.

*Northern Ireland: Time to Deal with the Past* blames the failure to deliver truth and justice on a lack of political will from both the UK government and Northern Ireland’s political parties.

Fifteen years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and one week ahead of the start of major new talks, the 78-page report finds that victims and their families have been failed by successive attempts to investigate abuses.

A failure to deliver a comprehensive approach to dealing with the past has contributed to the societal division that is still rife in Northern Ireland, Amnesty found.

The report, launched today in Belfast, is published ahead of the start of all-party talks chaired by the former US envoy to Northern Ireland, Richard Haass, which are aimed at dealing with the past, and addressing other contentious issues such as parading and flags.

Amnesty International Director for Europe and Central Asia John Dalhuisen said:

“Victims and relatives have been disgracefully let down by inadequate attempts to get to the truth about what happened in Northern Ireland.

“There’s a cruel irony in the fact that Northern Ireland is held up as a success story when many victims’ families actually consider their treatment a failure.

“Over the last decade a patchwork of measures, including isolated investigations, have failed to establish the full truth about the violations and abuses of the past and left many victims waiting for justice.

“The UK government and all political parties in Northern Ireland need to grasp the nettle now and agree a new approach which is capable of dealing fully with the past.”

The report finds that although numerous disparate and isolated mechanisms exist to look at separate events, the inherent limitations and narrow mandates of each process has meant that they cannot – even collectively – provide the full truth about human rights violations and abuses committed by all sides during the three decades of political violence.

During ‘the troubles’ in Northern Ireland, more than 3,600 people were killed and more than 40,000 injured. In most cases, no one has ever been held responsible.

Amnesty's report shows that families have been failed by processes conducted by the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Historical Enquiries Team, the Office of the Police Ombudsman and various coroners' inquests; each of which had a narrow remit and often left families with more questions than answers.

James Miller, whose grandfather David Miller was among nine people killed in a suspected IRA bomb attack in Claudy in 1972, said:

"It's said they are waiting for us to die out. But the next generation will still keep asking questions about what happened. Look at me, it was my grandfather who was killed and I am still going to keep asking for the truth."

Peter Heathwood was shot and left paralysed in an attack on his home by suspected loyalist gunmen in September 1979. His father, Herbert Heathwood, died of a heart attack at the scene. Peter said:

"People say let's forget about the past and move on, it was 30 years ago. That's a load of bunkum. In Northern Ireland the past is the present. If we don't deal with the past, I don't want my grandchildren to have to suffer this again. As injured people, we are living scars in society and we need to have it recognised that we have suffered."

Amnesty is calling for a comprehensive mechanism to be set up to review the conflict as a whole, establish the truth about outstanding human rights violations and determine responsibility.

Any such mechanism must also examine abuses suffered by those seriously injured, and victims of torture and other ill-treatment, which have too often been excluded from existing processes, the organisation said.

Such a mechanism would be an important step towards ending impunity for human rights violations and abuses in Northern Ireland and could contribute towards ending societal division.

#### **Notes to editors:**

1. Amnesty International has carried out research across the three decades of political conflict in Northern Ireland and documented a range of human rights violations and abuses, including unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment, abductions and unfair trials. A key part of the organisation's work is to campaign for effective investigations and for victims to be able to secure their right to remedy and reparation.
2. This report is based on research conducted by Amnesty over the last 18 months, including meetings and 47 detailed interviews with relatives of people from different communities who died in conflict-related killings in Northern Ireland and with people who were seriously injured during the conflict.
3. Amnesty met with representatives from the PSNI, the Office of the Police Ombudsman, the Historical Enquiries Team, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate, the Commission for Victims and Survivors, the Public Prosecution Service, and members of the NI Policing Board. Delegates also met with representatives from political parties, including the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, the Alliance Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Féin, and with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Shadow Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Justice Minister.
4. Amnesty also met with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supporting victims and families, including British Irish Rights Watch (now Rights Watch UK), the Committee on the Administration of Justice, Help NI, Northern Ireland Phoenix Project, the Pat Finucane Centre, Relatives for Justice and WAVE Trauma Centre. In addition, meetings were held with lawyers acting on behalf of some victims, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, academics, and other professionals. The research also draws on court cases, legislation, policy documents, freedom of information requests, reports of investigations, media reports and other open source materials.
5. The report recommends that some specific cases - on which Amnesty has made public campaigning calls, such as the Omagh bombing as well as the killing of Patrick Finucane, the Belfast solicitor shot by members of a loyalist armed group - warrant independent public inquiries.
6. Major inter-party talks, chaired by Dr Richard N Haass, the former US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland, are scheduled to begin on 16 September. The talks are expected to bring forward recommendations by the end of 2013 on the most contentious issues in Northern Ireland: parades and

protests; flags, symbols and emblems; and matters related to dealing with the past. The Haass Panel of Parties' terms of reference can be found here: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/haass-panel-of-parties-tor.pdf>